

## JESUS: HIS LIFE AND WORK

### Session 1

#### **What do you think are the things which make our Christian faith completely unique and special?**

Christianity is absolutely unique amongst the world's religions in that it's based on real historical events – the birth death and resurrection of Jesus Christ some 2,000 years ago and those events speak of God's love for us and his willingness to come to our aid through Jesus and his sacrificial death – no other religion has anything like this.

Jesus is an absolutely unique figure well worthy of our earnest study. He never held office, he never wrote a book and he never had a family or owned a house – yet he had more influence on the world than anyone who ever lived. He was not only a great moral and ethical teacher, but he was and is our Lord and Saviour. His incarnation, sacrificial death and glorious resurrection are a message in themselves. Let's see what we can learn about him.

There is lot's of evidence for the historical reality of Jesus both from Biblical and secular historical sources.

As regards non-Christian sources, some of the most important are:

Pliny the Younger (governor of Bithynia in AD 112) makes reference to Christians worshipping Christ as God in his Epistles

Cornelius Tacitus (c AD 55-120) wrote a history of the Roman Empire covering the years 14-68 AD. Unfortunately the books covering the period 29-32 AD are lost. However, in his coverage of the burning of Rome under Nero he says "Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate ...." Actually it's surprising that he devotes so much coverage to Jesus, a figure from a minor province, in this volume. That probably indicates that Christian influence was powerful and widespread by this time.

Mara bar Serapion wrote a letter to his son from prison a little after 70 AD in which he refers to the martyrdom of Christ.

Julius Africanus (c AD 160-240) in his Chronology refers to the time of Jesus' crucifixion and also refers to the darkness which fell on the land at that time, admittedly rather disparagingly. He also quotes another writer Phlegon (whose work has now been lost) and states that Phlegon also confirms darkness coming over the land at the time of the crucifixion.

Josephus the Jewish historian (c AD 37-100) refers to Jesus several times in his The Antiquities of the Jewish People. In his best known quote he writes:

"About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, *if indeed one ought to call him a man*. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many of the Jews and many of the Greeks. *He was the Messiah*. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. *On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and*

*countless other marvellous things about him. And the tribe of Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.”*

The oldest manuscripts of Josephus’ writings contain this quote, but its complete authenticity is greatly disputed because Josephus was not a Christian and in other places he refers to “Jesus who was called the Christ”. However, it is certain that the quote without the words marked in italics (which might have been added later) is original and valid.

The collection of Jewish traditions known as the Talmud also contains reference to Jesus. The most famous is in Sanhedrin 43a which states that “On the eve of the Passover Yesh was hanged.” This passage also says that he was hanged because he “ .... practised sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy.”

In conclusion we can say from these non-Christian sources that:

1. Jesus was truly an historical person
2. Jesus lived in Palestine during the first century AD.
3. The Jewish leadership of the time was involved in the death of Jesus.
4. Jesus was crucified by the Romans under the leadership of Pontius Pilate.
5. Jesus’ ministry was associated with wonders or sorcery – which we call miracles.

When we turn to Christian sources the four gospels give us quite a detailed account of Jesus’ life and teaching, although there is also lot’s of material from the early church fathers.

Most importantly the Christian sources, especially the Biblical sources, clearly testify to the truth of Jesus’s resurrection.

### **Do you believe in the truth of the Biblical accounts about Jesus especially as regards his birth, mission, crucifixion and resurrection?**

We need to remember that the gospels were essentially eyewitness accounts. Matthew and John were members of the 12 disciples and with Jesus throughout his ministry. Mark was interpreter to Peter in Rome and travelled with Paul on at least one of his missionary journeys, whilst Luke was a doctor and historian who carefully investigated everything having spent time journeying with Paul and with Peter in Rome. Also these accounts were not only written by eyewitnesses or those who knew eyewitnesses closely, but were written quite soon after Jesus’s death. Mark probably wrote between 50 and 55 AD, Luke was probably second to write around 60-62 AD, Matthew third to write maybe around 67-68 AD and John last to write around 85-90 AD.

Let’s move on to see what we can know about when Jesus was born, when he conducted his ministry and when he was crucified. This is all more difficult than you might think because the gospel writers weren’t really concerned with when questions, they didn’t write sequential historical accounts as that wasn’t the way people wrote then.

For example, in the Gospel of Mark the first part deals with events that took place in and around Galilee (Mark 1 – 9) followed by events that took place in Judea (Mark 10 – 16). So any event in Galilee will be in the early chapters and any event in Judea in the later chapters. We’re pretty sure that things weren’t like that because in the Gospel of John, Jesus moves back and forth between Galilee and Judea – which seems more probable. Matthew follows Mark and keeps this geographic framework, but alternates his account between events and

sayings. Luke on the other hand places most of Jesus' teachings in just two sections of the Gospel.

### **So When do you think Jesus was born?**

Well it wasn't year zero. The man who first calculated the year of Jesus' birth, a sixth century monk called Dionysius Exiguus got his calculations wrong. In fact he didn't even call this the year 0, he called the year of Jesus' birth 1 AD and didn't have a year zero (possibly because the symbol for zero in mathematics hadn't yet been introduced into Europe). So what can we do to arrive at the correct date? We know that Jesus was born to Mary "in the time of King Herod" (Matthew 2:1; compare Luke 1:5). Herod commenced his reign in 37 BC and according to Josephus died in the 34<sup>th</sup> year of his reign. Josephus was counting in the Roman calendar and translated that means Herod died in 4 BC. Josephus says that an eclipse of the moon took place before Herod died - and we know that took place on 12-13 March 4 BC. Josephus also says the Passover that year (April 11<sup>th</sup>) occurred after Herod's death, so we can date Herod's death as between 12<sup>th</sup> March and 11<sup>th</sup> April 4 BC.

Jesus must have been born before that. However, that only tells us he was born between 37 BC and 4 BC. Fortunately we have more data. Matthew 2:16, 19-20 suggest that we can date Jesus' birth up to two years before Herod's death, or even a little more. Herod enquired of the wise men exactly what time the star had appeared to them and Matthew says that the slaughter of children in Bethlehem involved "all who were two years and under, according to the time that [Herod] had learned from the wise men" (Matthew 2:16). Thus Jesus could have been up to two years old at the time of their visit. Thus some time between late 7 and very early 4 or late 5 BC is the best possible estimate of the time of Jesus' birth on that data.

According to Luke, Jesus was born in the days of Caesar Augustus (who reigned from 44 BC to AD 14) when Quirinius was governor of Syria (Luke 2:2). The reference by Luke to Quirinius is one of the most difficult problems involved in dating the birth of Jesus. We know that Quirinius was governor of Syria in AD 6-7 - but that is much too late. Either Luke made a tremendous error here, or (as I believe), Quirinius was governor of Syria on two separate occasions. There is a damaged inscription on a stele called the Lapis Tiburtinus, a fragment of a funeral stone found near Tivoli in 1764, which suggests that he might have been. We know from other sources that Quirinius was fighting a war in Macedonia until late 7 BC, again this points to Jesus' birth not being earlier than the end of 7 BC.

Thus the best estimate of the date of Jesus' birth on all available evidence is the end of 7 BC to the middle of 5 BC.

Following his birth, we know little of the chronology or indeed the content of Jesus' early life.

It would appear that Jesus grew up in a good if modest home. Joseph's work as a carpenter (Matthew 13:55) would have supported at least a lower middle class level of existence. Jesus appears to have had four half brothers and at least two half sisters (Mark 6:3). However, we know almost nothing of his childhood apart from the account of his discourse with the Rabbis and teachers of the Law in Jerusalem (Luke 2:42-49) when his parents took him there for his Bar-Mitzvah at the age of twelve.

During the early part of his adult life Jesus followed in his Father's footsteps working as a carpenter in Nazareth (Mark 6:3). It may well be that they worked together, although it seems that Joseph died at some time before the commencement of Jesus' public ministry (Mark 3:32).

Jesus's public ministry began with his baptism by John the Baptist and Luke tells us that this was in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, that's not as precise a reference as you might think at first sight because of different ways of counting when a reign began, but I think it's likely 28 or 29 AD. The synoptic gospels seem to imply that Jesus's ministry only lasted for less than two years because they only refer to one Passover, but John's gospel refers to three or possibly four Passovers and I think that's much more likely.

The last date we can fix is the date of Jesus's crucifixion. I believe that Jesus died on 14<sup>th</sup> Nisan when this fell on a Friday. That happened in 30, 33 and 36 AD. Now 36 is too late because that would make Jesus's ministry too long. Also, we know that Pontius Pilate was still procurator and his rule ended in 36-37 AD also Caiaphas ceased to be high priest in 36 AD which also point to an earlier date for the crucifixion. AD 30 is a little early, so I think it's most likely that the crucifixion was in 33 AD. This also fits well with the dating of the prophecy set out concerning the Anointed One in Daniel 9:25, and with Sejanus' attempted coup against the emperor Tiberius which was thwarted in AD 31. After this coup Tiberius purged most of the persons in high office who had been appointed by Sejanus over the following two years. Pontius Pilate was appointed by Sejanus and would thus have been very afraid for his life at the time. This possibly explains why the Jewish mob was able to intimidate the ruthless, anti-Semitic Pilate into killing Jesus with the threat "If you release this man you are no friend of Caesar!" (John 19:12).

So in summary, Jesus was born in 7-5 BC (I favour early 6 BC), commenced his ministry in 28-29 AD (I favour 29 AD) and was crucified at the Passover in 33 AD.

Going back to Jesus's birth:

**Scripture tells us that Jesus was born to Mary and conceived by the Holy Spirit. What do you think about the virgin birth, do you think it's an important issue for Christians?**

he was born to the virgin Mary (we've just discussed why that's important) in Bethlehem, where his parents had gone for a census. He was born in the line of David, I believe both through Mary and his to be adopted Father Joseph (I think Luke gives the genealogy of Mary and Matthew give that of Joseph).

Luke tells us that Jesus' birth took place in a manger (or a place with a feeding trough for animals) because there was insufficient space for them at the local caravanserai or possibly guest room (translated inn in modern bibles, although inns in the modern sense were largely unknown then). As a result, Jesus was placed in an animals feeding trough – a good example of the way in which God turns the values of the world upside down. We should also note that Jesus' birth was announced to Shepherds, who were regarded as disreputable and dishonest (Sanhedrin 25b) and unclean under the Law. This shows that Jesus was for the poor, sinners and outcasts.

It's also interesting that Bethlehem was the major source of sacrificial lambs for the Jerusalem Temple – what an appropriate place for the sacrificial lamb of God to be born. Incidentally, careful examination of the Jewish traditions makes it clear that we cannot rule

out Jesus' birth having been during the winter months on account of the flocks being out on the hills at the time (Luke 2:8) – as many have argued – because the Mishnah tells of flocks being out on the hills in February, one of the coldest months.

The fact that Jesus's birth was first announced to shepherds is another parallel with Jesus as the lamb of God.

We know that Jesus was circumcised according to the prevailing Jewish custom on the eighth day after his birth (Luke 2:21) as was John the Baptist (Luke 1:59). This might have been done in Bethlehem, but we just don't know. Circumcision was one of the few things which could lawfully be done on the Sabbath and it was usually rounded off by a festive meal. Circumcision meant that the recipient was assuming the obligations of the Law and was open to participate in the privileges and responsibilities of the covenant. It was customary for the parents to name the child at this time, and in accordance with the command given to Mary and Joseph by the angel, they named him Jesus. He had been born a saviour (Luke 2:11) and was now given the name that designated him as the One who fulfilled that role (Matthew 1:21).

As a perpetual reminder that all men are born in sin, a mother was ceremonially defiled by the birth of a child. In the case of bearing a son the mother was defiled for seven days until his circumcision, she then continued to be ceremonially unclean for a further 33 days. Only blood could remove the uncleanness and so a burnt offering and a sin offering were required to render the mother ceremonially clean. Furthermore the family were required to redeem their firstborn son for the equivalent of five shekels of silver in accordance with the rule laid down in Numbers 18:15-16. This is what Luke is referring to in Luke 2:22 when he says: "When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord". Actually attendance at Jerusalem was not compulsory for this ceremony, redemption could be made from any priest. Purification did require attendance at the Temple in Jerusalem, but under the law this could be done later when the mother attended a feast. Nevertheless, it seems Joseph and Mary troubled to take this special child to Jerusalem and completed Mary's purification at the same time.

The normal offering on such an occasion was a lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon or a dove for a sin offering, but the poor and those of modest means were allowed to offer two doves or two pigeons instead. This is what Mary and Joseph offered (Luke 2:24), so we can conclude that they were poor or at least of modest means at this time, presumably because the wise men had not yet visited them with their costly gifts.

The redemption ceremony consisted of the presentation of the child to the priest (in recognition of God's ownership of him) and second in the payment of five shekels. The priest then pronounced two blessings, one in thanksgiving for the gift of the firstborn son and the second in thanksgiving for the law of redemption. It would appear that this ceremony was performed by Simeon (Luke 2:25-27), a righteous man who may have been the son of the famous Rabbi Hillell who succeeded his father as president of the Sanhedrin. Simeon was moved by the Holy Spirit (Luke 2:27) to make a prophetic proclamation concerning Jesus that he would be God's salvation (Luke 2:30) and that he would be a light of revelation to the gentiles and a glory to Israel (Luke 2:32). Simeon also prophesied that Jesus would cause "the falling and rising of many in Israel" and would also be a sword that would pierce Mary's soul.

Matthew tells us that the Magi or wise men visited Jesus in Bethlehem up to two years after his birth (Matthew 2:7-11; 16) and clearly some time after his presentation in Jerusalem. We are told they visited Jesus in a house (Matthew 2:11). Popular tradition has it that there were three Magi, but we don't actually know. The Magi presented Jesus with costly offerings of gold, frankincense (an aromatic resin obtained from Boswellia trees) and myrrh (a red brown resinous material used in healing ointments and also for embalming and worth more than its weight in gold) (Matthew 2:11).

Immediately after the visit of the wise men Joseph was told to flee to Egypt, because Herod was going to kill Jesus (Matthew 2:13), and they remained there until after the death of Herod in 4 BC. After Herod's death Mary, Joseph and Jesus returned to Israel, settling in Nazareth (Matthew 2:21-23). That means that Jesus may have remained in Egypt for around a year or 18 months. It appears that Joseph had originally intended to return to Bethlehem, but on learning that a son of Herod, Archelaus, was ruling that part of Israel he decided to settle in a different region (Matthew 2:22).

We don't find much about Jesus's early life in the gospel accounts, we only hear of one or two fragmentary events.

### **Why do you think the gospels tell us so little about Jesus's early life?**

I think the gospel writers either deliberately suppressed details of his early life or just ignored them to focus on his mission.

Very soon after the visit of the Magi; Joseph, Mary and Jesus fled to Egypt to escape the wrath of King Herod as we have already noted. They remained there until after the death of Herod in 4 BC whereupon they returned to Israel. As we have already noted, it would appear that Joseph originally intended to return to Bethlehem, but felt it unwise to do so and instead settled in Nazareth where Jesus grew up.

It would appear that Jesus grew up in a good home. Joseph was apparently a man of good character and as a carpenter belonged to the middle industrial class. However, he seems not to have lived long (Mark 3:31-35; 6:3). The reference to Jesus as the "son of Mary" in Mark 6:3 would be impossible to imagine if Joseph were still alive at this time as a man was always referred to as the son of his father in Jewish custom (usually even after his father was dead). It appears that sometime between the visit to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve and the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, Joseph died.

Joseph's death left a considerable family to the care of Jesus as the eldest son. We know that there were four half brothers younger than Jesus; James, Joseph, Judas and Simeon and at least two half sisters (Mark 6:3). The brothers did not become disciples of Jesus prior to his crucifixion, but only after his resurrection. We know two of them better through the epistles of James and Jude. His brothers did not seem at all sympathetic towards his ministry before the resurrection. On one occasion, they apparently persuaded his mother to come and take him home and on another, they accused him of being a "secret Messiah" because he did not work in Jerusalem. No doubt that is part of the reason why Jesus said, "Only in his home town and in his own house is a prophet without honour." (Matthew 13:57).

The NT actually mentions the brothers and sisters of Jesus on numerous occasions (Mark 3:31-35; 6:3; John 2:12; 7:3-5, 10; Acts 1:14; 1 Corinthians 9:5; Galatians 1:19), although apart from the naming in Mark 6:3 already noted the other references are anonymous, apart from the naming of James in Galatians. Some scholars have argued that these were not really brothers of Jesus but only cousins or close relatives – no doubt in a misguided attempt to preserve the purity of Mary – but this does not really accord well with the way Matthew and Mark refer to them. It also does not fit well with the words of Matthew 1:24-25 “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. However, he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.” The only support I can find for the view that they were not true brothers, is that Jesus entrusted the care of his mother to the disciple John, rather than his brothers, at the crucifixion.

Of the early years of Jesus’ life, Luke simply says that Jesus “... grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.” (Luke 2:40).

The only other event from Jesus’ early life that is recorded in scripture is a visit by Joseph, Mary and Jesus to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover when Jesus was twelve years old (Luke 2:41-52). It was apparently the custom of his parents to do this each year (Luke 2:41), but it would have been completely in accordance with Jewish customs for Jesus not to attend until he reached the age of thirteen and became a “Son of the Law”, a full member of the synagogue. After that, he would be expected to attend those festivals for which attendance was prescribed by the Law – the feasts of the Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles – although many Jews scattered far and wide throughout the Roman Empire only made a real effort to attend the Passover. However, Jewish tradition did provide for sons to be taken to important observances a year or two before they reached thirteen, in order that they might be prepared, which is no doubt what was happening here.

We don’t know exactly how long the family stayed in Jerusalem, although Luke does note that after the feast was over Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem (Luke 2:43) – which seems to imply that they had stayed for the full seven days of the feast of unleavened bread (for which attendance was customary but not compulsory) after the Passover. His parents apparently did not discover this until they stopped to rest after the first days travel. When travelling to and from feasts, men and women usually travelled separately, the women going ahead, so perhaps we can infer that each parent thought that Jesus was with the other. Joseph and Mary then spent the night and travelled back to Jerusalem, where they spent yet a further day searching for Jesus. Luke tells us that after three days they found him in the temple courts (Luke 2:46) “sitting amongst the teachers [of the Law]”. It was a normal Jewish custom for the Midrash or Academy of Jerusalem to establish public question and answer sessions at the time of feasts or the Sabbath.

What was not normal was that Jesus’ questions should show such insight as to attract the special attention and surprise of the teachers and that he should manifest skill in answering questions put to him (Luke 2:46-47). Apparently by this time, he had somehow acquired a good education – clearly better than the basic education in the Torah which would normally have been provided to Jewish children by the Synagogue – although there was a Jewish tradition that the Messiah would have a direct knowledge of God. This was obviously continued, as the adult Jesus clearly knew Hebrew (which was a dead language in popular circles by this time and only used by certain sects and academics) since some of his later scriptural quotations refer to the Hebrew original rather than the LXX. It is likely that he

spoke Greek also – otherwise he would not have been able to communicate with the non-Jews, with whom he is reported as conversing.

His parents surprise at his learning and interest in the Temple (Luke 2:48-49) indicates that, after the miraculous events surrounding his birth, the intervening years had probably been relatively normal – so much so that the uniqueness of Jesus and his divine calling had faded from their memory. Indeed the fact that this is the only incident from Jesus' childhood recorded in the canonical Gospels suggests that no other incidents during this period were particularly significant. Certainly, the Gospel writers were unaware of any other miraculous acts or events during this time. After Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding in Cana, John explicitly states “[t]his, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.” (John 2:11). The final factor which argues for the normalcy of these ‘silent years’ is the unbelief of Jesus’ family and community which we have already mentioned.

Of the nearly twenty years which passed between the event in Jerusalem and the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry we can know little or nothing. The one important truth we can learn is that even at the age of twelve Jesus was apparently already conscious of his unique relationship with God and at least something of his calling.